

That November Day in 1963

A Dallas Exhibit Will Re-Create the School Book Depository

By Michael Etzkin
Special to The Washington Post

The sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository slid up and open. Below was Dealey Plaza and its landmarks: the triple underpass, the picket fence, the grassy knoll.

As she opened the window, Linda-Lyn Adams, president of the Dallas County Historical Foundation, was talking animatedly about plans to change this floor of the building into an exhibit. My thoughts were elsewhere.

Here I was, standing at the most notorious windowsill in America, the perch where Lee Harvey Oswald watched the 35th president of the United States as he rode smiling and waving down Elm Street in a black Lincoln.

The view Oswald had from the southeast corner window when he shot John F. Kennedy has changed some, but the room remains much as it was that Friday afternoon in 1963.

I touched the window's wooden

frame. The feeling that resulted is hard to explain, but it brought back memories. There are very few days in history for which so many people can say they remember exactly what they were doing at a particular time. Nov. 22, 1963, is one of them.

I turned to see what the sixth floor looked like from the perspective of my corner perch. I had pictured Oswald firing from an office window, but the sixth floor was an open space—much like an attic, with 14-foot wooden columns.

The entire floor, about 10,000 square feet, is being turned into an exhibit that will open Feb. 20.

In 1963 it was just a storage area for books. There were no partitions, no rooms. Book cartons formed corridors, and it was easy to see how Oswald could have moved boxes in such a way as to be unseen from the sixth-floor doorway had anyone looked in that day.

The boxes are gone now, and pipes and wiring have been installed to service the floor above. The fire sprinklers overhead are new. Other-

wise, on this summer day the room still looked like an empty warehouse. It was a long way from being an exhibit.

I leaned out the window. People were looking up, pointing. Tourists have been coming here for 25 years just to see the building from the outside.

Dallasites had problems with this at first. The world press depicted the city as the city of hate, and the city was divided, Adams said.

"It was a terrible time. You couldn't travel outside the city limits for fear of someone saying something derogatory about being from Dallas.

"The prevailing attitude was, let's let it go away," Adams said, "but what they didn't realize is that a number of persons go to historical sites in a very reverent way. They would come here and there was nothing for them to see."

In 1971 the Texas School Book Depository Co. moved out of the warehouse; in 1977 the county bought the building and began reno-

of 25 Years Ago

vating it for offices. County officials sealed off the sixth floor and left it as it was. Today the building, known as the Dallas County Administration Building, is the seat of the county government.

In 1983, the Dallas County Historical Foundation, a nonprofit organization, was created to create and oversee a permanent exhibit on the sixth floor commemorating the events of the day of the assassination. The foundation has since raised more than \$3 million.

The exhibit will offer films, photographs and re-creations of key areas, including the corner window and the corner staircase where Oswald's rifle and clipboard were found.

So as not to intrude on the working government offices inside, an elevator will run up the back of the building, where there will be a parking lot and visitors' center. Here, the first in a series of exhibits will review Kennedy's life against the backdrop of 1960s culture.

Visitors will then proceed down an aisle lined with photographs from

the day of the assassination, hanging nearly floor to ceiling, giving an impression of what it was like to be in the motorcade moments before the shooting. As visitors move down the aisle, a recording of a news bulletin will announce that the president and Gov. John Connally have been shot.

The aisle leads tourists to a recreation of the southeast corner window—sealed off by glass—as investigators found it. Facing Elm Street are six other windows from which visitors will be able to view the motorcade route and the infamous grassy knoll so dear to conspiracy theorists. Opposite the windows is an exhibit outlining the events of that November weekend, including a 10-minute film in one of two small theaters.

The postassassination investigations will take up one corner of the exhibit. "There were about 14 investigations, but four major ones. They will be described along with their findings," Adams said.

The next section is devoted to theories that Oswald did not act alone but was part of a conspiracy to murder the president.

"After the Warren report came out, there were so many questions. The various critics of the Warren Commission began to study the investigation," Adams said. "We can't in any way portray all these critics, but because of the critics of the War-

ren Commission, it eventually brought about a new federal investigation from a House Select Committee."

Part of this section will be given over to a display on critics of the conspiracy theory.

After that, there is another short film and exhibit on the Kennedy legacy.

There remains one more place to explore—the northwest corner staircase, by which Oswald exited and where his mail-order rifle and his clipboard were found. It was then the only way on and off the floor except for the freight elevator next to the staircase.

Plans are to enclose the corner for viewing, presenting it as it was when investigators came on the scene.

The exhibit is scheduled to open Feb. 20; it will be open seven days a week, with an admission fee of \$4 for adults, \$3 for seniors and tour-group members and \$2 for children. Plans for the visitors' center include rest rooms, a courtyard and a small bookstore. For more information, contact the Dallas County Historical Foundation, 411 Elm St., Fifth Floor, Dallas, Texas 75202-3301, (214) 653-6666.

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